

# 3

## Prussia and Austria 1849–66

### POINTS TO CONSIDER

After the failure of the 1848–9 revolutions, it seemed that Austrian power had revived. Austrian policy was still based on dominating Germany by keeping it weak and divided. Thus, Germany would only be unified once Austrian strength had been broken. The only country that could do that was Prussia. In the 1850s Prussia was regarded as the least important of the major powers. But appearances were deceptive. In 1862 Otto von Bismarck was appointed Minister President of Prussia. Four years later Prussia smashed Austria in the Seven Weeks' War and established the North German Confederation. How much of Prussia's success was due to Bismarck? How much was due to other factors? The chapter will consider these (and other) questions by examining:

- The position of Austria after 1848
- The position of Prussia after 1848
- Bismarck: the man and his aims
- Austro-Prussian conflict
- Prussian ascendancy
- Factors helping Bismarck

### Key dates

1849		The Erfurt Plan
1850		The Capitulation of Olmutz
1851		German Confederation restored
1861		William I became King of Prussia
1862		Bismarck became Prussia's Chief Minister
1864		Austria and Prussia fought Denmark
1866	June	Start of Seven Weeks' War
	July	Battle of Sadowa
	August	Treaty of Prague
1867		North German Confederation created

## 1 | The Position of Austria After 1848

### The Prussian Union Plan

Despite his refusal to accept the imperial crown offered by the Frankfurt Parliament, Prussian King Frederick William IV was attracted to the idea of a united Germany with himself at its head, providing he had the consent of the Princes. In 1849 General Radowitz, an ardent nationalist and an old friend of Frederick William, came up with the Prussian Union Plan. His proposal for a *Kleindeutschland*, under Prussian leadership, met with Frederick William's approval.

According to the plan, there would be a German Federal **Reich**, which would exclude Austria. It would have a strong central government, based on the constitution drawn up by the Frankfurt Parliament (see page 36), with the King of Prussia as Emperor. Although Austria would not be a member of the *Reich*, there would be a special relationship, a permanent 'union', between the *Reich* and the Habsburg Empire.

This complicated plan, which tried to provide both *Kleindeutschland* and *Grossdeutschland* solutions, was not acceptable to Austria. Austrian Chief Minister, Schwarzenberg, saw it as a devious scheme to reduce Austrian influence in Germany. He was not, however, immediately able to mount effective opposition to it, as internal Austrian problems, not least a Hungarian uprising, were occupying his attention. This allowed Prussia, whose army was the strongest authority in Germany in 1849, to press on with the plan. A 'Three King's Alliance' between Prussia, Saxony and Hanover was the first step. Then a number of smaller states were persuaded to fall in with the Prussian proposals. Encouraged by his success, Radowitz called a meeting of representatives of all the German states to Erfurt in March 1850 to launch the new *Reich*. Twenty-eight states agreed to the creation of the Prussian-dominated Erfurt Union. But several important states, suspicious of Prussian ambitions and fearful of Austria's reaction, declined to join.

### Austrian opposition

Schwarzenberg, having suppressed the Hungarian rising, was able to reassert Austria's position in Germany. He put forward a scheme of his own for a *Grossdeutschland* to be governed jointly by delegates from Austria, Prussia and the larger German states. Attracted by the way in which this proposal seemed to offer them greater political influence, some of the larger states (for example Hanover and Saxony) deserted Prussia and gave their support to Austria.

Schwarzenberg now summoned the *Diet* of the old German Confederation (see page 5), thought to have been dead and buried, to meet in Frankfurt in May 1850. The response was good and he was able to announce that the *Diet* and Confederation were both alive and well. Thus, by the summer of 1850 there were two assemblies claiming to speak for Germany: the Prussian-led Erfurt Parliament and the Austrian-led Frankfurt *Diet*.

Key question  
Why did the Prussian Union Plan fail?

The Erfurt Plan: 1849

**Reich**  
The German for empire.

Key date

Key term

The 'Capitulation of Olmutz': November 1850

German Confederation restored: 1851

### Prussia versus the Confederation

A showdown soon occurred. A revolution in Hesse-Cassel, a member state of the Erfurt Union, prompted its ruler to request help from the Frankfurt *Diet*. But the Erfurt Parliament also claimed the right to decide the dispute. Hesse-Cassel was of strategic importance because it separated the main part of Prussia from the Rhineland, and therefore controlled communications between the two. The Prussian army mobilised. Austria replied with an ultimatum that only the troops of the old Confederation had the right to intervene.

Small-scale fighting broke out between Prussian and Confederation troops. Frederick William, who had no wish for war, dismissed Radowitz. Edwin Manteuffel, the new Prussian Minister-President (Prime Minister), was also anxious to avoid an all-out war.

### The 'Capitulation of Olmutz'

A meeting between Manteuffel and Schwarzenberg was arranged at Olmutz and on 29 November 1850 Prussia agreed to abandon the Prussian Union Plan. The two men also agreed to a conference of states being held at Dresden early in 1851 to discuss the future of Germany. Schwarzenberg had won a major diplomatic victory and Prussia had suffered huge humiliation.

However, the revival of Austria was not allowed to go as far as Schwarzenberg hoped. His proposal for an Austrian-dominated 'Middle Europe', incorporating the 70 million people of all the German states and the Habsburg Empire, was not acceptable to the smaller German states, as it would have increased the power of the larger states at their expense. There was strong pressure for a return to the situation pre-1848. Prussia supported this. Given that the Prussian Union Plan was lost, anything from Prussia's point of view was better than accepting the Austrian counter-plan.

In May 1851 the German Confederation of 1815 was formally re-established and an alliance between Austria and Prussia appeared to signal a return to the policy of close co-operation. However, relations between Prussia and Austria were far from close. Many Prussians blamed Austria for the humiliation of the 'Capitulation of Olmutz'. Some were determined that Prussia should one day dominate a united Germany. Austria clearly stood in the way. In 1856 an emerging Prussian statesman, Otto von Bismarck, commented:

Germany is clearly too small for us both ... In the not too distant future we shall have to fight for our existence against Austria ... it is not within our power to avoid that, since the course of events in Germany has no other solution.

### Austrian economic and financial problems

In 1849 Schwarzenberg, realising the political implications of Prussia's economic success, proposed establishing a *Zollunion*, an extended customs union, between Austria and the *Zollverein* (see pages 15–16). This move failed. So too did Schwarzenberg's

efforts in 1851 to establish an alternative customs union to include Austria and those German states still outside the *Zollverein*. Thus, while Austria clung to its political leadership of the Confederation, it was effectively isolated from the Prussian-dominated economic coalition of the German states.

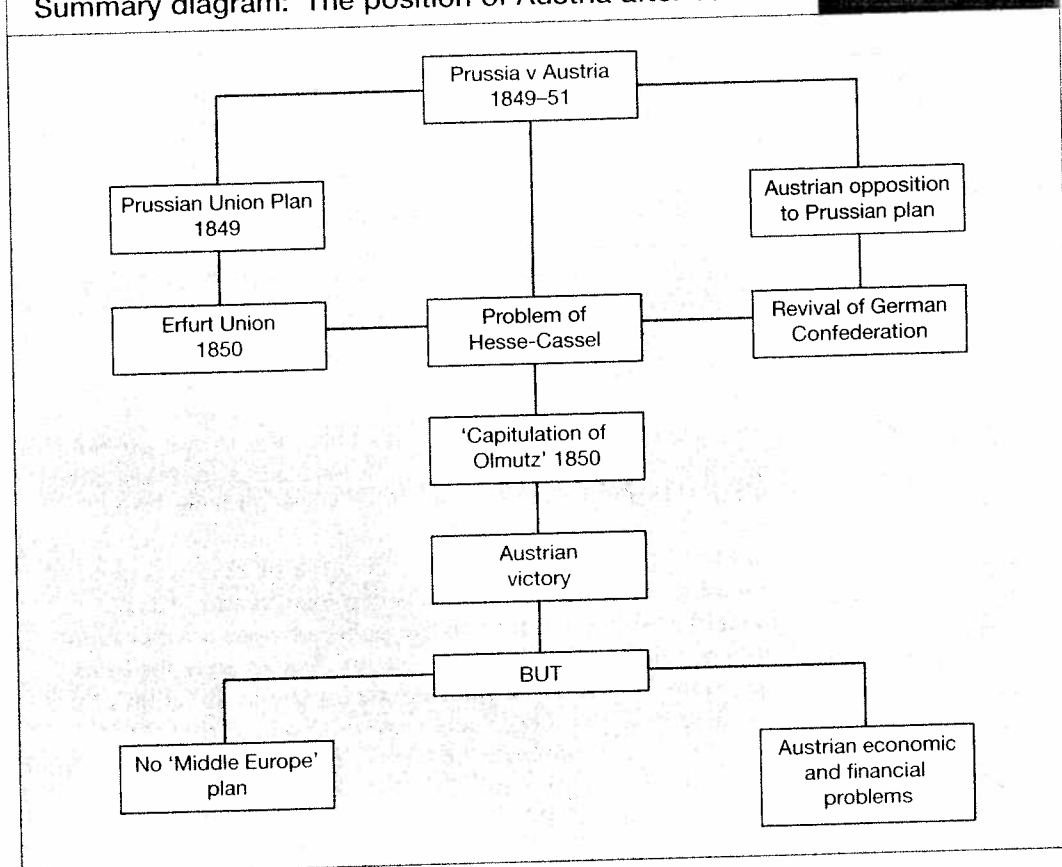
Despite industrial expansion and rising exports, Austrian government finances were in difficulties. Taxation was not sufficient to finance the central administration or to maintain an efficient army. By the end of the **Crimean War** Austria was economically and financially vulnerable, crippled by the cost of keeping large armies mobilised during the war, and in no state to cope with the depression which swept across Europe in the late 1850s.

### Crimean War

This was a war fought by Britain, France and Turkey against Russia. Most of the fighting was in the Crimea – a southern part of Russia. The war, lasting from 1854 to 1856, ended with Russia's defeat.

Key term

Summary diagram: The position of Austria after 1848



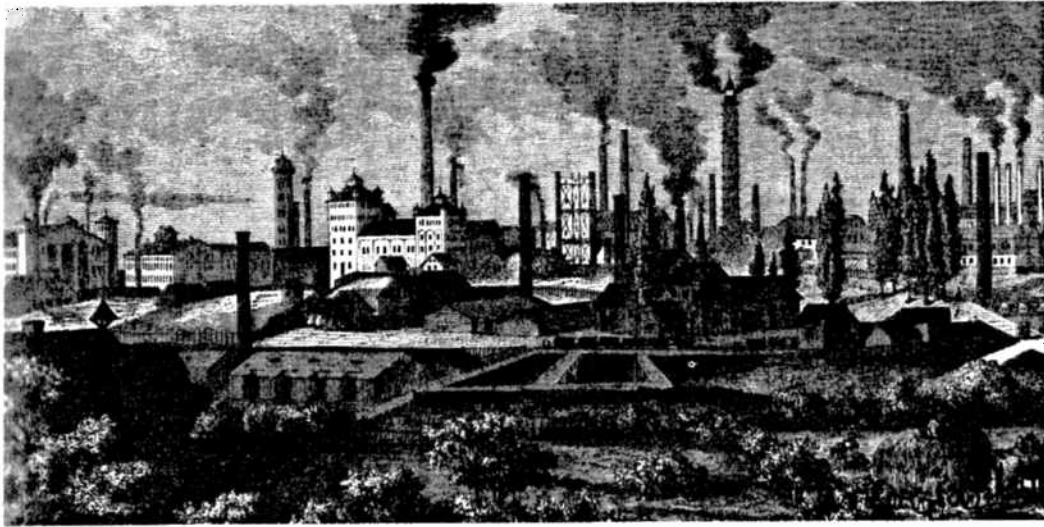
## 2 | The Position of Prussia After 1848

### Prussian economic success

Although Prussia had suffered a serious political setback in 1850–1, economically the story was different. In the 1850s the Prussian economy boomed. Industrial production, railway building and foreign trade more than doubled.

### Key question

What were the main developments in Prussia in the years 1850–62?



The Krupp works in Essen in 1866.

The reasons for Prussia's success are complex. Scholars may have ascribed too much influence to the *Zollverein*. It did not provide protection for Prussian industries. Nor did it create a unified German economy. Other factors may have been equally or more important:

- Prussia had a good education system at various levels, from primary schools to university level.
- There was a plentiful supply of coal, iron and chemicals.
- Prussia had a good system of communications.
- A number of key individuals like Alfred Krupp, the great iron and steel magnate, played an important role.
- Historians disagree about the role played by the Prussian state. Some think it helped economic development. Others think it hindered it.

For whatever reasons, by the mid-1850s Prussia was economically strong. Its ability to finance a full-scale war (against Austria) was increasing year by year.

### The growth of liberalism

Despite repressive and reactionary policies after 1848–9 (see page 42), Prussian liberalism grew in strength. It was supported by an increasingly self-confident middle class. Professors, teachers, civil servants, Protestant pastors, businessmen and lawyers joined the great national liberal associations and subscribed to liberal journals.

Nevertheless, for much of the 1850s there was general political apathy in Prussia: few people bothered to make use of their franchise and politics was the concern of a small élite – for the most part lawyers and civil servants. Right-wing liberal politicians, traumatised by the experience of 1848, which showed how easily

mass involvement in politics could descend into revolution, remained suspicious of full democracy. They were less concerned with strengthening Parliament than with ending the dominant influence of the aristocracy and the army over the government. However, left-wing liberals still argued in favour of universal suffrage and insisted that the masses could be trusted to vote for men of substance and culture. There was one thing on which both liberal wings could agree: that was that national unity was the absolute priority.

### **Conservative reform**

During the 1850s, Minister-President Manteuffel was prepared to accept limited change as long as it did not lead to any extension of parliamentary influence. He had a particular hatred of the liberal, professional class, considering them to be arrogant, cowardly and godless. Nevertheless, he realised that he had to have a degree of popular support. He believed the best way to stabilise society and reduce the chance of revolution was to improve the living conditions of peasants and workers.

### **Reform in the countryside**

Manteuffel was especially concerned to help the peasants. He believed that they were the basis of popular support for the monarchy.

- All the peasants were freed from their feudal obligations to their landlords.
- Special low-interest government loans were available to enable peasants to buy their land; 600,000 did so.
- In some parts of Prussia, where peasants had moved away to the towns looking for work, there was underpopulation in the countryside, but elsewhere there was overpopulation and great pressure on land. Where this was the case the government gave peasants financial help to move to less populated areas of the country.

### **Reform in the towns**

- In towns the government set out to help factory workers.
- Payment of a standard minimum wage was encouraged.
- Financial help was given to industry.
- Inspectors were appointed to improve working conditions in factories, and children under 12 were forbidden to do factory work.
- Industrial courts were set up to help in the settlement of disputes.

### **Political reaction**

Manteuffel believed that ministers had a duty to govern well, and that this meant governing in the best interests of all the people. At the same time he had no time for democracy and governed without Parliament for the whole of his time as Minister-President (1850–8). In other ways he was equally reactionary, imposing



strict censorship and restrictions on the freedom of political parties to hold meetings. Prussia in the 1850s was a curious mixture; politically reactionary and repressive, socially reforming and economically prosperous.

### Key question

Why did the Crimean War help Prussia?

### Key date

William I became King of Prussia: 1861

### Key term

#### North Italian War

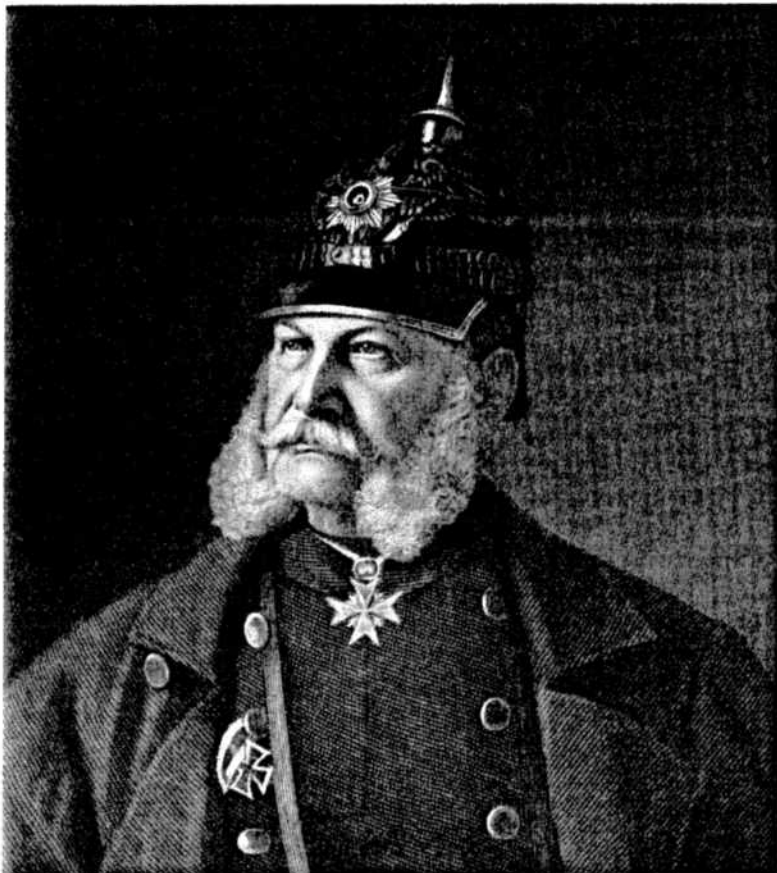
In 1859 French Emperor Napoleon III supported Piedmont against Austria. Piedmont was seeking to increase its influence in northern Italy – at Austria's expense. Austria was defeated.

### The international situation

Prussia, despite being a growing economic power, seemed to be a second-rate player in the 1850s. Having avoided military conflict with Austria in 1850, it then played no role in the Crimean War. However, by remaining strictly neutral, Prussia benefited politically as well as economically. It managed to keep on good terms with the other European powers, especially Russia.

Austria also remained neutral, but gained little respect because of its wavering diplomacy, sometimes siding against Russia, sometimes against Britain and France. By 1856 Austria had lost the friendship of Russia without obtaining that of Britain and France.

Prussia might have profited from the **North Italian War** in 1859 if it had supported Piedmont and France against Austria. However, popular feeling in Prussia, as in most German states, was anti-French. Prussia tried to benefit by offering Austria help in exchange for conceding Prussian primacy in Germany.



King William I of Prussia 1797–1888.

Austria's speedy defeat (an underfinanced and ineptly led army was defeated at the battles of Magenta and Solferino by French troops) and willingness to make peace with Napoleon III prevented Prussia's aims being realised. But, at least the war had been a severe blow to Austrian prestige. Austria lost Lombardy (in northern Italy) to Piedmont. Moreover, the cost of the war had a terrible effect on Austria's already strained finances.

### William I

Frederick William, whose mental balance had always been precarious, became more and more unstable, until, in 1858, he was declared insane. His brother William became **regent**, and when Frederick William died in 1861, William succeeded to the throne as William I of Prussia.

William, already 63 when he became king, was to reign for another 27 years. A soldier by training and a conservative by instinct, William was practical, hard-headed and inflexible – the complete contrast to Frederick William. Only Bismarck, his chief minister for nearly the whole of his reign, was ever able to make him change his mind. A devout Protestant, he believed that he was answerable only to God, which made it difficult to argue with him. He was prepared to listen to advice from ministers, but not necessarily to act on it. At heart he was an absolutist.

On becoming regent, he dismissed Manteuffel, replacing him with a ministry containing both liberals and conservatives. The atmosphere of comparative freedom led people to talk of a 'new era'. The 1858 elections gave the moderate liberals a small majority in Parliament. They hoped to play a significant role in government. William had no intention that they should.

### Reform of the army

The strengthening of the army was one of William's main concerns. He believed it was the key to the future greatness of Prussia. Little had been done to reform or increase the size of the Prussian army since 1815. The mobilisation of the Prussian army during the North Italian War in 1859 had been a disaster. The war was over before it could be organised into some degree of readiness. The delay meant William lost the opportunity to achieve some political advantage.

As a result of this ignominious failure, William appointed a new Minister of War, General Roon. In 1860 Roon, an administrative genius and an extreme conservative, introduced a bill to reform the army. This aimed to:

- double the regular army's size
- increase the period of **military service** from 2 to 3 years
- reduce the role played by the inefficient **Landwehr**
- re-equip the troops.

Roon's bill touched a number of sensitive points as far as the liberal majority in Prussia's Parliament was concerned. The liberals feared that the government might use the expanded

#### Key question

In what ways was William I different from Frederick William?

#### Key question

Why was there a constitutional crisis in Prussia between 1860 and 1862?

#### Regent

A ruler invested with authority on behalf of another.

#### Military service

The requirement for young men to serve in the army.

#### Landwehr

A middle-class reserve force that could be called up for service in an emergency. Many of its officers were old and poorly trained.



General Albrecht von  
Roon 1803–79.



army, not for the defence of Prussia from foreign attack, but against its own people as had happened in 1848–9 (see page 42). Moreover, the civilian *Landwehr*, despite its military shortcomings, was popular with liberals. While there was some room for compromise on detail, both sides believed that important principles were at stake:

- William was determined that army matters should be kept above parliamentary approval.
- Liberals believed that Parliament should have financial control over army expenditure. Without such a right it had very little power.

### Constitutional crisis 1860–2

The army bill thus led to a constitutional crisis. In 1860 Parliament would agree only to approve the increased military budget for a year and would not agree to extend the term of military service to 3 years.

In June 1861, radical liberals formed the Progressive Party. The Progressives were committed to a popular rather than a royal army. In the newly elected Parliament in December 1861 the Progressives became the largest party. Parliament would not pass

the money bill for the army and William would not accept 2 years' military service.

William again dissolved Parliament and replaced his liberal ministers with conservatives. The May 1862 elections were a disaster for the King and a triumph for the Progressives who, in alliance with the other opposition groups, now had an overall majority in the lower house.

In September, Parliament again refused to pass the army bill. Some Prussian conservatives hoped that this would lead to a royal *coup* and the overthrow of the constitution. Instead, William, fearing civil war in Prussia, contemplated abdication. However, on 22 September on the advice of Roon, he appointed Otto von Bismarck as Chief Minister. This was one of the most momentous occasions in Prussian, German and European history.

### The constitutional crisis solved

Bismarck's appointment as Chief Minister was seen as a deliberate affront to the Prussian liberals. They regarded him as a bigoted reactionary. Given that he had no ministerial experience, he was not expected to last long in power. On 30 September 1862, in his first speech to the Prussian Parliament, Bismarck declared:

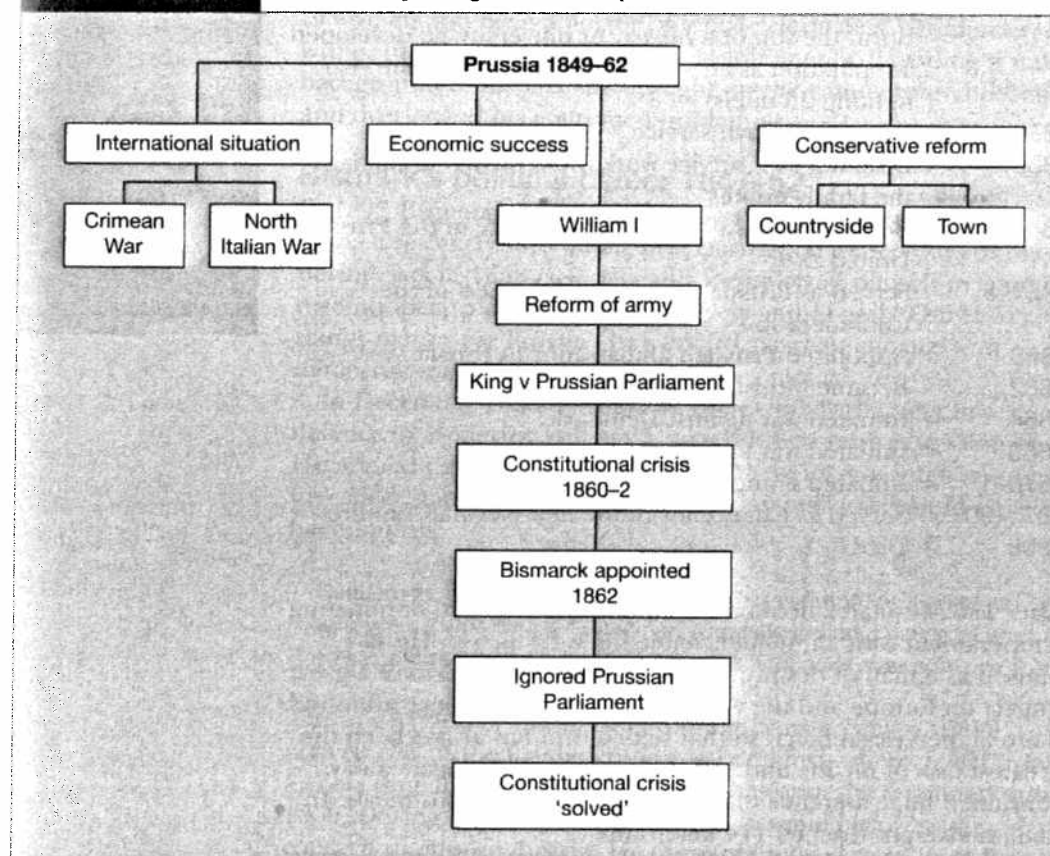
Germany does not look to Prussia's liberalism, but to its power. ... It is not through speeches and majority decisions that the great questions of the day are decided. That was the great mistake of 1848–9. It is by iron and blood.

This phrase, afterwards reversed to 'blood and iron', became almost synonymous with Bismarck. In truth, the speech was not his greatest effort. What he had meant to say was that if Prussia was to fulfil its role in leading Germany towards greater unity, it could not do so without an efficient army, which the King's government was seeking to build. His speech, aimed at winning liberal support, badly misfired. To most liberal nationalists such blood-curdling talk from a notorious reactionary was seen as a deliberate provocation. Bismarck thus failed to build any bridges to his political opponents.

In the end he solved the problem of the military budget by withdrawing it, declaring that the support of Parliament for the army bill was unnecessary as the army reforms could be financed from taxation. To liberal suggestions that the people refuse to pay taxes, Bismarck replied that he had 200,000 soldiers ready to persuade them.

Parliament declared his actions illegal, but he ignored it. The taxes were collected and the army was re-organised as if Parliament did not exist. For 4 years and through two wars, he directed Prussian affairs without constitutionally approved budgets and in the face of fierce parliamentary opposition. New elections in 1863 gave the liberals 70 per cent of the parliamentary seats. 'Men spat on the place where I trod in the streets', Bismarck wrote later. But he rightly judged that his opponents would avoid an appeal to force: few wanted a repeat of 1848.

Summary diagram: The position of Prussia after 1848



### 3 | Bismarck: The Man and his Aims

#### Key question

What were the main influences on the young Bismarck?

#### Bismarck's early life

Bismarck's father was a moderately wealthy *Junker*. The *Junkers* were the landowning nobility, with their own rules of conduct based on an elaborate code of honour, devotion to the military life, a strong sense of service to the Prussian state and an even stronger sense of their own importance. Most were deeply conservative. Bismarck was proud of his *Junker* descent and all his life liked to present himself as a *Junker* squire. However, he was too clever, too enterprising and too non-conformist to be a typical *Junker*.

Bismarck's mother came from a middle-class family of Hamburg merchants. Many of her relatives were civil servants, university professors or lawyers. Most were politically liberal. Bismarck seems to have been ashamed of this side of his family, often speaking of them in a disparaging way. He did not get on well with his mother, but from her he inherited his intelligence and determination.

At his mother's insistence, he was sent away to school in Berlin, where he proved resistant to education, although he later became a good linguist, fluent in French, English and Russian. He was an

Key date

Bismarck became Prussia's Chief Minister: 1862

### Profile: Otto von Bismarck 1815–98

- 1815 – Born, the son of a *Junker*. At university he developed a reputation as an accomplished duellist (one year fighting 25 duels)
- 1836 – Entered the civil service
- 1839 – Disliking civil service work, he returned to manage the family estates
- 1847 – Became an ultra-conservative deputy in the Prussian United *Diet*
- 1851–9 – Served as Prussia's delegate at the *Diet* of the Confederation
- 1859 – Appointed Prussian ambassador to Russia
- 1862 – Became Minister-President
- 1864 – Initiated war against Denmark
- 1866 – Initiated war against Austria
- 1870–1 – Initiated Franco-Prussian War
- 1871–90 – Served as Chancellor of the new German Empire
- 1898 – Died



After 1862 Bismarck became a man of imperious and dominating temperament with an unquenchable thirst for power. He saw himself as a man of destiny, convinced that he would have a great impact on Europe and the world. Nevertheless, he once admitted: 'I am all nerves; so much so that self-control has always been the greatest task of my life and still is'. He smoked 14 cigars a day, consumed huge amounts of alcohol and ate enormous meals. In 1883 his weight reached 114 kilograms.

Given to melancholy, he suffered from periods of laziness. He was also an inveterate womaniser and gambler. Aggressive and emotional, his relations with William I were stormy; their meetings sometimes degenerated into slanging matches. Bismarck once pulled the handle off the door as he left the room, so great were his feelings of tension. Ruthless, vindictive and unscrupulous in getting his own way, he could also be charming and witty, a delightful companion and entertaining conversationalist.

excellent sportsman, a crack shot and an expert fencer. He went on to university, where he wasted a good deal of time and money, drank too much and got into debt. Managing to pass his law examinations, he won entry to the Prussian civil service and spent 4 years as a less than committed civil servant. A year of military service followed, enjoyed neither by Bismarck nor by the army.

On his mother's death in 1839, he retired to help run the family estates. Country life soon bored him, and he found entertainment chasing after peasant girls and playing wild practical jokes on his neighbours. By the time he was 30, Bismarck had achieved little. Then in 1847 two events occurred to change the direction of his life. First, he married and secondly he got involved in Prussian politics.

His wife Johanna von Puttkamer was deeply religious: 'I like piety in women and have a horror of female cleverness', Bismarck wrote. Johanna satisfied both his requirements. Providing a stable background to his life, she brought up their numerous children and overlooked his continued infidelities.

### Bismarck's political career 1847–62

In 1847 Bismarck was elected to the Prussian United *Diet*. It marked his entry into public life. During the March days of the Berlin riots in 1848 (see page 40), he involved himself in counter-revolutionary plots. He was excessively anti-liberal. 'Only two things matter for Prussia', he said, 'to avoid an alliance with democracy and to secure equality with Austria.'

In December 1850 he spoke in the Erfurt Parliament in defence of Frederick William's 'surrender' to Austria at Olmutz. He argued that a state should fight only in its own interest – what he called 'state egoism' – and war for Hesse-Cassel would have been foolish.

Gentlemen, show me an objective worth a war and I will go along with you ... woe to any statesman who fails to find a cause of war which will stand up to scrutiny once the fighting is over.

This speech led to Bismarck becoming Prussian envoy to the revived *Diet* of the Confederation at Frankfurt, where, apart from a short time in Vienna as Prussian ambassador, he remained until 1859. During his years at Frankfurt, it became his overriding concern to oppose Austria. He therefore moved away from the views of his conservative Prussian associates who had sponsored his appointment to Frankfurt. They thought the fight against revolution was still the priority and that it required the solidarity of the conservative powers Russia, Austria and Prussia. As he became increasingly anti-Austrian, he became convinced that war between Prussia and Austria was unavoidable. He believed that such a conflict would eventually lead to a divided Germany with a Protestant north and a Catholic south. By 1858 he was arguing that Prussia should seek support among German nationalists and a year later that Austria should be driven out of the Confederation and a *Kleindeutschland* established under Prussian control.

By the early 1860s he had a reputation as a tough, ambitious and ruthless politician. Although viewed (mistakenly) as a conservative reactionary and (correctly) as a loyal supporter of the monarchy, he was also seen (with some justification) as an unpredictable maverick. However, he was also a realist.

**Key question**  
What were Bismarck's aims in 1862?

### Bismarck's aims

Initially, Bismarck's main aim was Prussian domination of north Germany rather than full national unity. He was essentially a Prussian patriot rather than a German nationalist: his loyalty was to the Prussian King – not to the German people. Liberal nationalists viewed him with disfavour in the early 1860s, seeing him not as a potential unifier but as an anti-liberal reactionary. In

## 62 | The Unification of Germany 1815–1919

the late 1840s and early 1850s Bismarck had shown little but contempt for nationalism. However, by the late 1850s his views began to change. Aware of the popular appeal of German nationalism, he realised that the movement might be manipulated in the interests of enhancing Prussian power. Indeed, he tended to see Prussian and German interests as one and the same. He said in 1858 there was 'nothing more German than the development of Prussia's particular interests'.

Convinced that great issues are decided by might not right, he was determined to make Prussia as mighty as possible. Prussian leadership in Germany would ensure Prussian might in the future. While he was determined to end Austrian primacy in the Confederation, he was not necessarily committed to war. A diplomatic solution, in his view, was a preferable option.

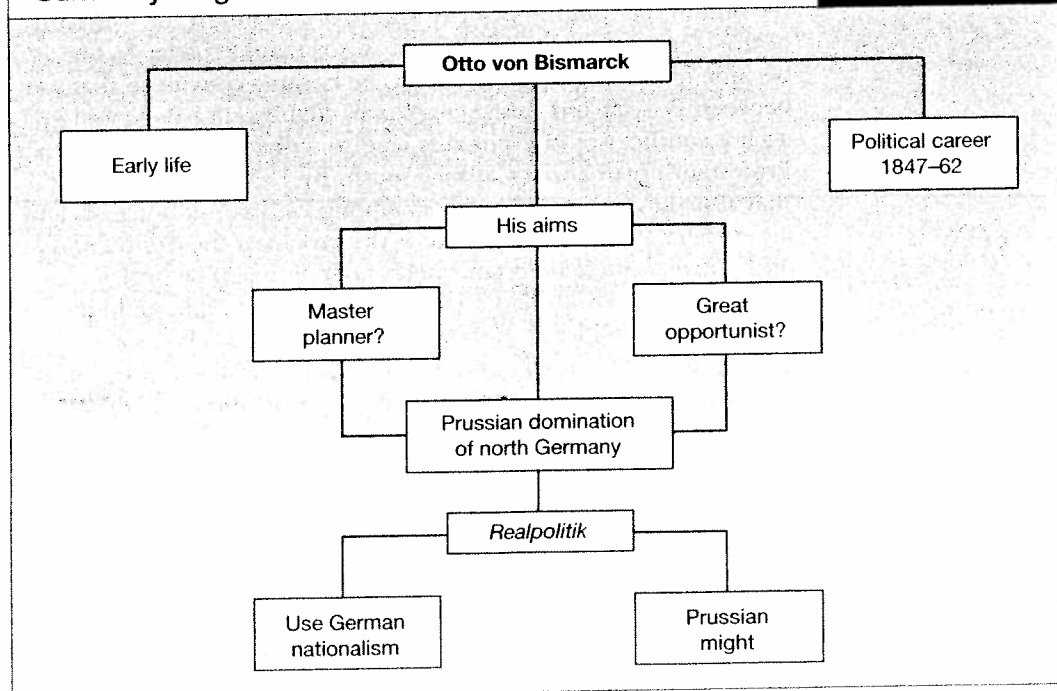
*Realpolitik* characterised Bismarck's political career from first to last. He had contempt for idealism and idealists. While he was a sincere Protestant, he was able to divorce personal from political morality. What was good for Prussia was good. In his view, the end justified the means. He recognised that a conservative regime could no longer operate without popular support, not least that of the liberal bourgeoisie whose power was growing. He hoped to achieve conservative ends by means that were far from conservative. His unscrupulous methods occasionally brought him into conflict with William I and the Prussian military and political élites. But while many distrusted his tactics, most respected his judgement. Indispensable to the Prussian monarchy for nearly thirty years, he made the difficult unification process appear, with hindsight, easy.

### *Realpolitik*

The term is used to describe the ruthless and cynical policies of politicians, like Bismarck, whose main aim was to increase the power of a state.

Key term

Summary diagram: Bismarck – the man and his aims



**Key question**

Why did Austria and Prussia go to war against each other?

**4 | Austro-Prussian Conflict**

Relations between Austria and Prussia, cool before 1862, became much cooler after Bismarck's appointment. In December 1862 he warned Austria that it was inviting catastrophe unless it recognised Prussia as an equal in Germany. It should be said that in 1862–3 the prospect of Bismarck defeating Austria and bringing about a Prussian-dominated Germany was highly unlikely. Bismarck's own position in Prussia seemed vulnerable. Prussian (and German) liberals regarded him with hostility and contempt. Prussia's position in Germany seemed similarly vulnerable. Its territories straddled across central Europe. Austria had a population almost twice that of Prussia and had a larger army. Most German states had no wish to be dominated by Prussia.

**The Polish Revolt**

In the late eighteenth century Prussia, Russia and Austria had divided Poland between them. Relations between Prussia and her Polish citizens had been uneasy and Poles had been blamed, without much evidence, for some of the disturbances of 1848. Bismarck thought they were troublemakers.

In 1863 when the inhabitants of Russian Poland rose in revolt, Bismarck viewed the situation with concern. The revolt might escalate into a general Polish uprising. Tsar Alexander II ordered the revolt to be suppressed. France, Austria and Britain protested and offered mediation. Bismarck took the opportunity to gain Russian friendship by offering military assistance. The Tsar, confident he could defeat the Poles unaided, rejected the offer, but agreed to a Convention by which Prussia would hand over to the Russians any Polish rebels who crossed the border.

Prussian liberals, who hated autocratic Russia, protested at Bismarck's action. So too did France, Britain and Austria. Bismarck found himself isolated. In an attempt to improve his diplomatic position, he claimed that the Convention did not exist because it had never been ratified. This angered the Tsar and Prussia was left completely friendless.

The Polish rising was finally suppressed in 1864. Prussia emerged from the affair less disastrously than Bismarck expected. Given that the Tsar had been deeply offended by Austrian and French criticism, it was likely that Russia would remain neutral in the event of Prussia going to war with Austria or France.

**Key question**

Why did Prussia and Austria go to war with Denmark?

**The problem of Schleswig and Holstein**

In November 1863 the childless King Frederick VII of Denmark died. Frederick had also been the ruler of the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein that had been under Danish rule for 400 years. The population of Schleswig was mixed Danish and German, while that of Holstein was almost entirely German. Holstein was a member of the German Confederation; Schleswig was not. There had often been trouble over the Duchies. In 1848 the Holsteiners had rebelled against Denmark and Prussian troops had marched to their aid with the support of the Frankfurt



Parliament, until Russian intervention had forced the Prussian army into retreat.

A treaty signed in London by the Great Powers in 1852 had agreed that Frederick would be succeeded as ruler of Denmark and of the Duchies by Christian of Glücksburg, who was heir to the Danish throne through marriage to the King's first cousin. Schleswig and Holstein contested his claim on the grounds that inheritance through the female line was forbidden in the Duchies. Schleswig-Holsteiners put forward their own claimant, the Prince of Augustenburg. He, however, did not object to being passed over in the treaty, having been well paid to agree, although he never formally renounced his rights.

When Christian became King of Denmark in November 1863, government officials in Holstein refused to swear allegiance to him, and the son of the Prince of Augustenburg now claimed both duchies on the grounds that his father had not signed away his rights to them. This move was passionately supported by German nationalists. King Christian immediately put himself in the wrong by incorporating Schleswig into Denmark, thereby violating the 1852 Treaty of London. In December 1863 the smaller states of the German Confederation, condemning Christian's action as tyrannical, sent an army into Holstein on behalf of the Duke of Augustenburg, the Prince of Augustenburg's son. The Duke became the most popular figure in Germany, a symbol of nationalism, uniting both liberals and conservatives.

#### Bismarck's aims

Bismarck was not influenced by German public opinion. However, he did see that the crisis offered splendid opportunities. He hoped to annex the two duchies, strengthening Prussian power in north Germany and winning credit for himself into the bargain. He had no wish to see the Duke of Augustenburg in control of another independent state in north Germany. Nor did he care at all about the rights of the Germans within the duchies. 'It is not a concern of ours', he said privately, 'whether the Germans of Holstein are happy'.

#### Austrian–Prussian co-operation

Bismarck first won Austrian help. Austrian ministers had very different aims from Bismarck. Austria, while supporting the Augustenburg claim, was suspicious of rampant German nationalism. Anxious to prevent Bismarck from allying Prussia with the forces of nationalism, Austria was happy to pursue what appeared to be the traditional policy of co-operating with Prussia. Bismarck, implying that he too supported Augustenburg, kept secret his own expansionist agenda. Agreeing to an alliance, Austria and Prussia now issued an ultimatum to Denmark threatening to occupy Schleswig unless it withdrew the new constitution within 48 hours. Denmark refused. Thus, in January 1864 a combined Prussian and Austrian army advanced through Holstein and into Schleswig.

Denmark, failing to win the support of Britain, France or Russia, agreed that the Schleswig-Holstein matter should be resolved by a European conference. However, the London Conference (April–June 1864) failed to reach agreement. Counting on Britain's support, Denmark refused to make concessions and fighting recommenced. Despite British Prime Minister Palmerston's boast that 'if Denmark had to fight, she would not fight alone', there was little Britain could actually do. Denmark thus had little choice but to surrender in July 1864.

**Key question**  
What were the results  
of the Danish War?

### The Results of the Danish War

By the Treaty of Vienna in October 1864, the King of Denmark gave up his rights over Schleswig and Holstein which were to be jointly administered by Austria and Prussia.

As Bismarck probably intended, the question of the long-term fate of the Duchies now became a source of severe tension between the two German powers. Public opinion in Germany and the Duchies expected that Augustenburg would become Duke. However, Bismarck proposed that he be installed on conditions that would have left him under Prussia's power. This was totally unacceptable to Austria and to the Duke, who refused to become a Prussian puppet. Austria turned to the *Diet*. A motion calling for the recognition of the Duke of Augustenburg easily passed. But Prussia ensured nothing was done. Thus, by the summer of 1865 the future of the Duchies was still not settled, and relations between Austria and Prussia were poor. Austria continued to support Augustenburg's claim while Prussia worked for annexation.

### The Convention of Gastein

In truth, neither Austria nor Bismarck wanted war at this stage. Austria, almost financially bankrupt, regarded war as too expensive a luxury. Bismarck was aware that William I was reluctant to fight a fellow German state. Nor was he convinced that the Prussian army was yet ready to fight and win. While Bismarck and William I were 'taking the waters' at the fashionable Austrian spa town of Bad Gastein, an Austrian envoy arrived to open negotiations. As a result of this meeting it was agreed in August 1865, by the Convention of Gastein, that:

- Holstein (the Duchy nearer to Prussia) would be administered by Austria.
- Schleswig would be administered by Prussia.
- The two powers would retain joint sovereignty over both Duchies.

Bismarck knew he could now pick a quarrel with Austria over Holstein at any time he wanted.

### Bismarck's motives

Bismarck's motives in dealing with the Schleswig-Holstein affair remain a subject of debate. Had he used the Duchies, as he later claimed, as a means of manoeuvring Austria into open confrontation with Prussia? Or did he (whatever he said later) have no clear policy at the time except to 'allow events to ripen'? Historian A.J.P. Taylor thought that he 'may well have hoped to manoeuvre Austria out of the Duchies, perhaps even out of the headship of Germany, by diplomatic strokes ... . His diplomacy in this period seems rather calculated to frighten Austria than to prepare for war'.

**Key question**  
What were Bismarck's motives?

### The meeting at Biarritz

The particular problem of the Duchies temporarily was solved, but the more general problem of rivalry between Prussia and Austria remained. While Bismarck may not have wanted war at this stage, he realised that it was a distinct possibility. He therefore did all he could to strengthen Prussia's international position. Confident that Britain and Russia would not support Austria, his main fear was France.

In October 1865 Bismarck met the French Emperor Napoleon III at Biarritz in the south of France. Historians continue to debate what occurred. Almost certainly nothing specific was agreed if only because neither man wanted a specific agreement. Bismarck was not prepared to offer German territory in the Rhineland in return for France's neutrality. Napoleon, calculating that a war between the two German powers would be exhausting and inconclusive, intended to remain neutral and then to turn this to advantage by mediating between the two combatants, gaining a much greater reward in the process than anything Bismarck could presently offer. Given Napoleon's anti-Austrian stance, it took little skill on Bismarck's part to secure the Emperor's good wishes.

### War with Austria

Over the winter of 1865–6 Prussian-Austrian relations deteriorated. Austria now determined on a policy of confrontation with Prussia. It did so from a weak position:

- It had no allies.
- It was on the verge of bankruptcy.
- Holstein was sandwiched between Prussian territory.

In February 1866 at a meeting of the Prussian Crown Council Bismarck declared that war with Austria was only a matter of time. It would be fought not just to settle the final fate of the Duchies, but over the wider issue of who should control Germany.

Bismarck carefully laid the groundwork for war. A secret alliance was made with Italy in April 1866, by which Italy agreed to follow Prussia if it declared war on Austria within 3 months. In return Italy would acquire Venetia from Austria when the war ended.

**Key question**  
Why did Austria and Prussia go to war in 1866?

**Table 3.1** Prussian, Austrian and French strengths

	Population (millions)		Relative share of world manufacturing output		Key outputs in 1870	
	1840	1870	1830	1860	Coal	Steel
Prussia	14.9	19.4	3.5	4.9		
Germany	32.6	40.8			23.3	0.13
Austria-Hungary	30 [est.]	34.8	3.2	4.2	6.3	0.02

	Austria	France	Prussia
<b>Military</b>			
1850	434,000	439,000	131,000
1860	306,000	608,000	201,000
1866	275,000	458,000	214,000 <sup>a</sup>
1870	252,000	452,000	319,000 <sup>b</sup>

**Railways (kilometres in operation)**

1850	1,579	2,915	5,856 <sup>c</sup>
1860	4,543	9,167	11,089
1870	9,589	15,544	18,876

<sup>a</sup> In 1866 Italy, Prussia's ally, had an army of 233,000.

<sup>b</sup> By 1871 the German States under Prussia's leadership could mobilise 850,000 men.

<sup>c</sup> The figures are for the territory of the 1871 *Reich*.

Immediately after the treaty with Italy had been signed, Bismarck stoked up tension with Austria over Holstein and over proposals to reform the Confederation. Bismarck knew that these proposals, which included setting up a representative assembly elected by universal manhood suffrage, would be unacceptable to Austria.

The Austrians, afraid of a surprise attack, were forced to take what appeared to be the aggressive step of mobilising unilaterally in April 1866. Prussia mobilised in May, seemingly as a response to Austrian threats.

Britain, France and Russia proposed a Congress to discuss the situation. Bismarck felt compelled to agree: to do otherwise would put him in a weak position. But he was very relieved when Austria refused, making the Congress unworkable. The situation deteriorated further when, in early June, Austria broke off talks with Prussia and, in breach of previous promises, referred the problem of the Duchies to the *Diet*. Bismarck's response was to send a Prussian army into Austrian-controlled Holstein on 9 June. Austrian troops were permitted to withdraw peacefully.

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To Bismarck's surprise and disappointment this did not immediately lead to war. To stir things up, he presented to the *Diet* an extended version of his proposals for a reform of the Federal Constitution:

- Austria was to be excluded from the Confederation.
- There should be a national parliament elected by universal suffrage.
- All troops in north Germany should be under Prussian command.

The next day Austria asked the *Diet* to reject Prussia's proposals and to mobilise for war. Censured by the *Diet*, the Prussians withdrew from the Confederation, declared it dissolved and invited all the other German states to ally themselves with them against Austria. However, most began mobilising against Prussia.

Bismarck now issued an ultimatum to three northern states, Hanover, Hesse-Cassel and Saxony, to side with Prussia or else to be regarded as enemies. When the ultimatums were rejected, Prussian troops invaded the three states on 15 June. Hesse-Cassel and Saxony offered no resistance; Hanoverian forces were quickly defeated.

### The Seven Weeks' War

The future of Bismarck, Prussia and Germany lay with the Prussian army. Since the shambles of 1859, reforms had been successfully carried out and the army was now under the command of General Helmuth Moltke, a gifted military leader. Advance planning and preparation, particularly in the use of railways for moving troops, meant that mobilisation was much more efficient than that of the Austrian army.

Key question  
Why did the  
Prussians win?

Start of the Seven  
Weeks' War: 1866

key date



A contemporary illustration of the Battle of Sadowa, 1866.

Austria's position was far from hopeless:

- It had more soldiers: 400,000 to the Prussians' 300,000.
- Most of the other German states supported Austria.
- Austria had the advantage of a central position.
- Initially many Prussians were lukewarm about the war.

However, the Italians fulfilled their part of the secret treaty by following Prussia into the war. This meant that Austria was forced to fight on two fronts, in the north against Prussia and in the south against Italy.

The Italian army, weak and inefficient, was defeated by the Austrians on 24 June. To prevent the victorious Austrians in the south from linking up with their troops in the north, Moltke determined to invade Bohemia. One single-track railway ran from Vienna to Bohemia. By contrast, Prussia used five lines to bring its troops southwards. Moltke adopted the risky strategy of dividing his forces for faster movement, only concentrating them on the eve of battle. Fortunately for Prussia, the Austrian high command missed several opportunities to annihilate the separate Prussian armies.

### The Battle of Sadowa

On 3 July 1866 the major battle of the war was fought at Sadowa (called Königgrätz by the Prussians). Nearly half a million men were involved, with the two sides almost equally balanced. The Austrians were well equipped with artillery, and used it effectively at the start of the battle, but they were soon caught in a Prussian pincer movement. The Prussians brought into use their new **breech-loading needle gun**. Its rate of fire was five times greater than anything the Austrians possessed, and it proved decisive. The Austrian army fled in disorder. Austria suffered 45,000 casualties, Prussia 9000. The Prussians had won the battle and with it the war.

The Austrian government recognised that further fighting would almost certainly lead to further defeats and might even result in a break up of the Austrian Empire. For Austria the priority was a rapid end to the fighting, at any reasonable cost. Prussia was now in a position to dictate terms as the victor. It was a personal victory for Bismarck, and put him in a position to dominate not only Prussia, but also the whole of Germany for the next quarter of a century.

Key date

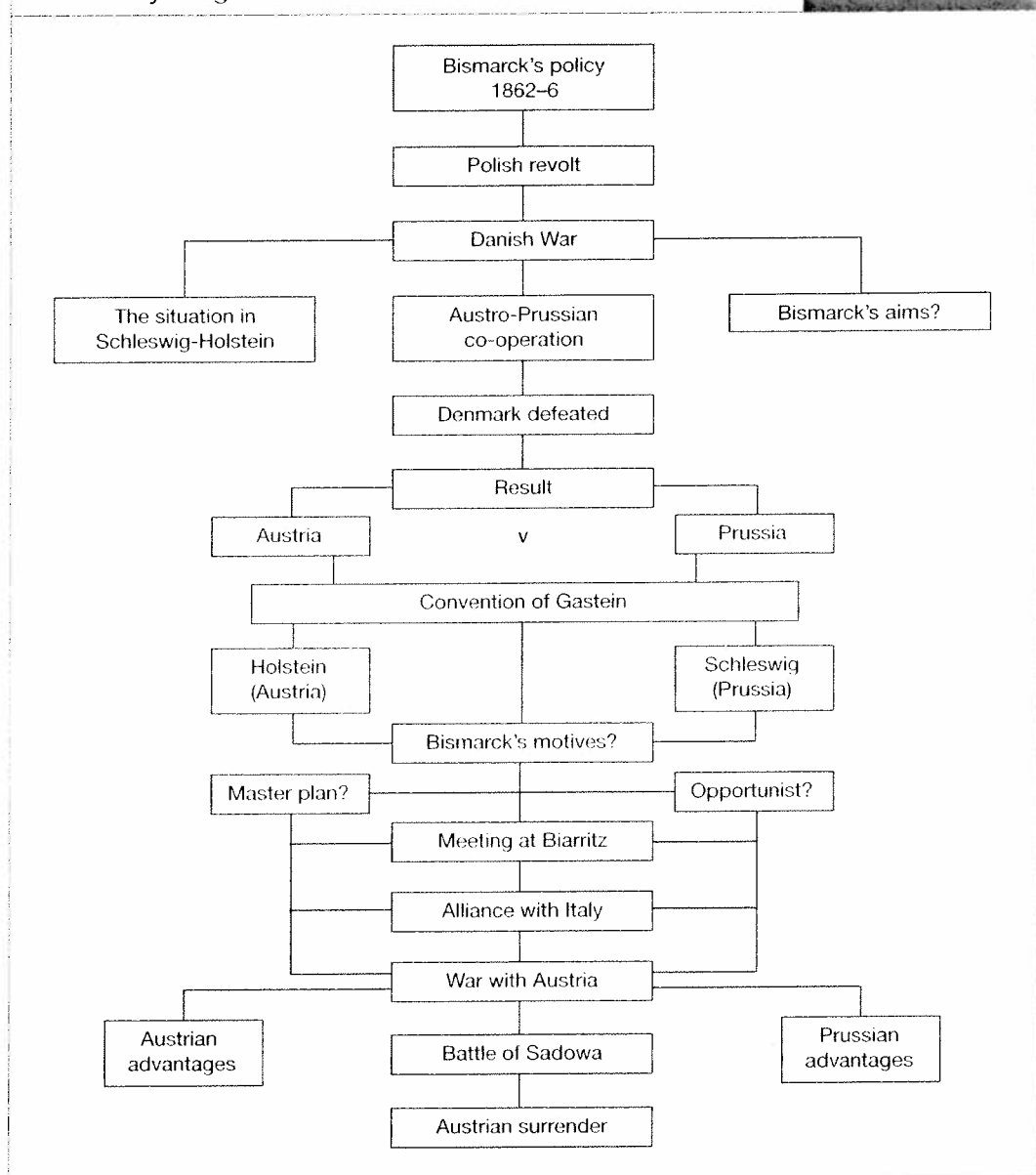
Battle of Sadowa:  
July 1866

Key term

**Breech-loading  
needle gun**

This gun, which loaded at the breech rather than the barrel, could fire seven shots a minute.

Summary diagram: Austro-Prussian conflict



## 5 | Prussian Ascendancy

Bismarck returned to Berlin with the King and Moltke to a hero's welcome. A grateful Prussia presented him with a reward of £60,000, with which he bought an estate at Varzin in Pomerania. He was promoted to Major General in honour of the victory. It had been noticeable that at meetings of the war cabinet he had been the only one present wearing civilian clothes. Any uniform he was then entitled to would have marked him as an officer of lower rank than anyone else there, and he could not have borne that. Now he was a high-ranking officer he could flaunt his

Key question  
What were the main results of the Seven Weeks' War?



uniform on an equal footing, and he never again appeared in public except in full dress uniform. He had earned his spurs and intended to wear them in a Prussia, and later a Germany, dominated by military power.

### The aftermath of victory

The road to Vienna lay open after the victory at Sadowa. Austria was at the mercy of Prussia. William I, once reluctant to wage war on a fellow monarch, now proposed an advance on Vienna and a takeover of Austria. Bismarck, fearful that France and Russia might intervene, counselled caution. He wrote to William as follows:

We have to avoid wounding Austria too severely; we have to avoid leaving behind in her unnecessary bitterness or feeling or desire for revenge. We ought to keep the possibility of becoming friends again. If Austria were severely injured, she would become the ally of France and of every opponent of ours ... German Austria we could neither wholly nor partly make use. The acquisition of provinces like Austrian Silesia and part of Bohemia could not strengthen the Prussian state.

At a noisy and angry meeting of the war cabinet on 23 July, William I and his senior generals raged against Bismarck's policy of not annexing any Austrian territory, while Bismarck himself threatened suicide if his advice was not taken. In the end Bismarck got his way. The war was brought to a speedy end and a moderate peace concluded with Austria. The only territory lost by Austria as a result of the Seven Weeks' War (Holstein apart) was Venetia in Italy.

### The Treaty of Prague

An armistice was signed between Prussia and Austria in July. This was followed by the Treaty of Prague in August. The terms of the treaty were mainly concerned with the remodelling of northern Germany:

- Prussia annexed a good deal of territory, including Schleswig and Holstein, Hesse-Cassel, Hanover, Nassau and Frankfurt.
- All other German states north of the River Main, including Saxony, were to be formed into a North German Confederation under Prussian leadership (see Map 3.1 on page 73).

Bismarck might have pressed for the unification of all Germany in 1866. However, as well as the threat of French intervention, he feared that if Prussia absorbed too much too soon, this might be more trouble than it was worth. The four Catholic states south of the River Main – Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden and Hesse-Darmstadt – thus retained their independence. Nevertheless, all four states agreed to sign a secret military alliance with Prussia, whereby, in the event of war, they would not only fight alongside

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Prussia, but also put their armies under the command of the King of Prussia.

The Treaty of Prague is usually seen as a milestone on the way to German unity. Ironically, the destruction of the German Confederation could be seen as dividing rather than uniting Germany. After 1866 Germans were separated into three distinct units:

- the North German Confederation
- the four South German states
- the Austrian Empire.

### North Germany

Bismarck had shown a calculated moderation in his treatment of Austria. He showed neither of these to some of his fellow north Germans. Hesse-Cassel, Nassau, Hanover, Frankfurt and Schleswig-Holstein were not consulted about uniting with Prussia; they were just annexed. The King of Hanover was driven out and his personal fortune confiscated. (It came in useful to Bismarck later when it was used to bribe the King of Bavaria.)

Those north German states, such as Saxony, not annexed by Prussia, were left with some independence within the North German Confederation. Some historians have seen this as a trial run by Bismarck in North Germany for an eventual wider federation taking in all *Kleindeutschland*. They argue that he could easily have annexed the remaining northern states if he had so wished, but did not do so because he wanted to show those Germans south of the Main how advantageous membership of a Prussian-controlled federation could be. A more credible argument is that Bismarck saw no advantage to Prussia in too speedy a takeover of so many states at once. Such action would only lead to a dilution of Prussian culture and traditions. Instead of Prussia absorbing Germany, Germany would end up absorbing Prussia.

### The North German Confederation

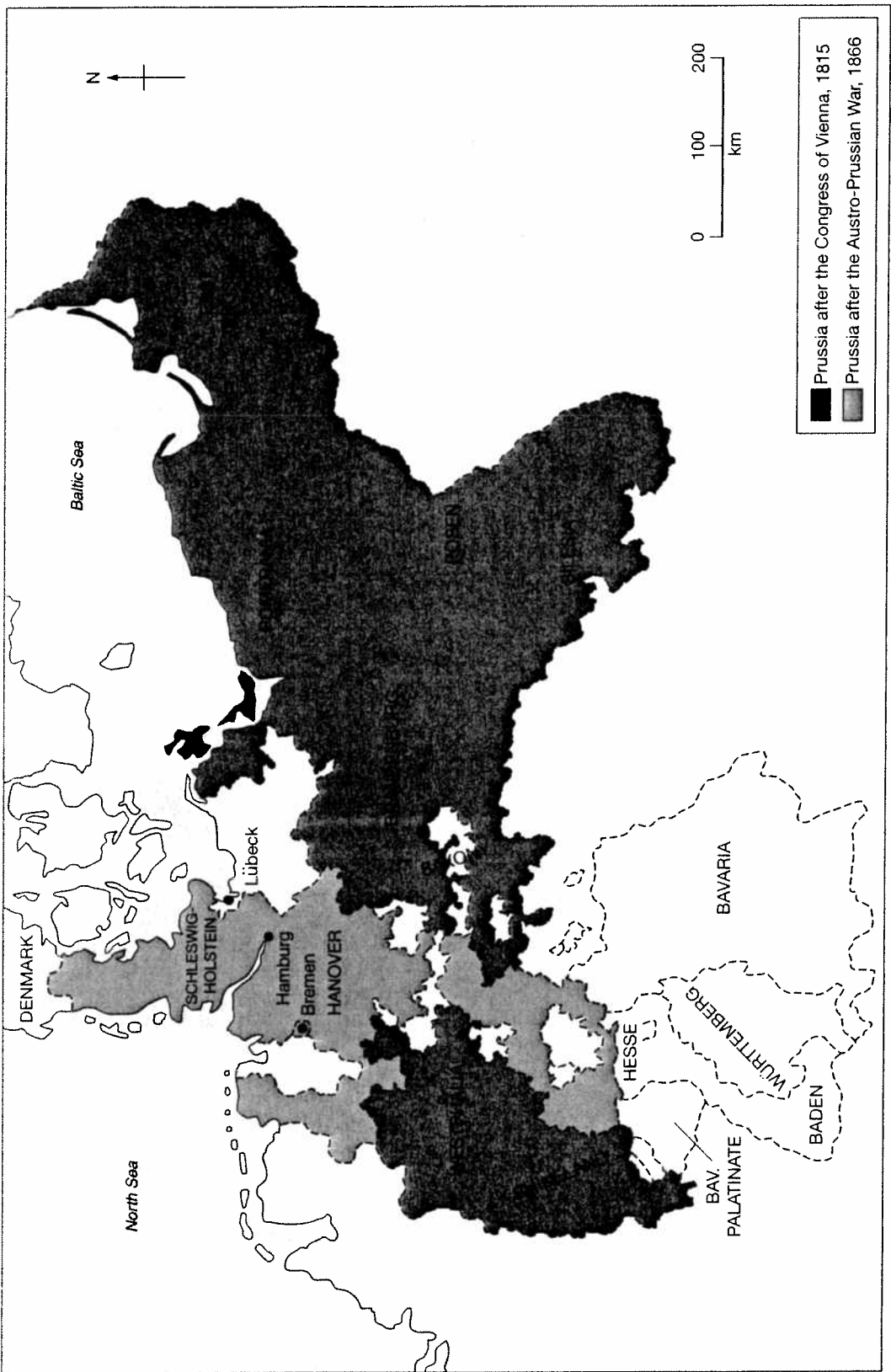
At the end of 1866 Bismarck began drafting the constitution for the North German Confederation. This was accepted by April 1867 and came into effect in July. The Confederation lasted only 4 years, but its constitution was to continue, largely unaltered, as the constitution of the German Empire. It was designed to fit the requirements of Prussian power and Bismarck's own political position.

Bismarck was always opposed to the idea of parliamentary government on the British model, which reduced the crown to symbolic status and put power in the hands of a parliament. His declared view of the political abilities of his fellow Germans was low:

Considering the political incapacity of the average German, the parliamentary system would lead to conditions such as had prevailed in 1848, that is to say weakness and incompetence at the top and ever new demands from below.

North German  
Confederation  
created: 1867

key date



Map 3.1: Prussia before and after the Austro-Prussian war.

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE NORTH GERMAN CONFEDERATION

The King of Prussia was President of the North German Confederation and also the commander-in-chief, and had the power of declaring war and making peace. He appointed and could dismiss the Federal Chancellor.

The states, including Prussia, had substantial rights, keeping their own rulers and being governed by their own laws and constitutions with their own parliamentary assemblies. They had their own legal and administrative systems, and local taxation met the cost of government services.

The *Bundesrat* (the Federal Council) was the upper house of the Confederation's Parliament. Here the various states were represented by delegates who acted on the instructions of their governments. The number of delegates was fixed in relation to the size of the state: out of 43 votes, Prussia had 17, Saxony four and most of the others one each. Decisions were made by a simple majority vote.

The *Reichstag* was the lower house of the Confederacy's Parliament. It was elected by universal manhood suffrage – a seemingly giant step towards democracy. However, its powers were limited.

The Federal Chancellor (the Chief Minister) was the main driving force in the Confederation. He represented the Prussian King in the *Bundesrat*. He was not responsible to the *Reichstag* nor did he need majority support in it. He was responsible only to the President of the Confederation.

All laws needed approval of the *Reichstag*, the *Bundesrat* and the King of Prussia as President of the Confederation. They also needed the signature of the Chancellor.

Given his views, Bismarck's insistence on universal manhood suffrage in the election of the *Reichstag* is surprising. However, he believed that the traditional loyalties of peasants would preserve the conservative order in Germany. Nor did he intend the *Reichstag* to play a significant part in public life. Essentially, it was little more than an organ of public opinion. Speaking in confidence to a Saxon minister, he declared he was trying 'to destroy parliamentarianism by parliamentarianism'. In effect, he hoped that the activities of a weak *Reichstag* would help to discredit parliamentary institutions in German eyes. Certainly, the democratic manner of the election process did not compensate for the great weakness of the *Reichstag*, which was that ministers, including the Chancellor, were not members of it and were not responsible to it.

### Popular support for Bismarck

On the same day as the battle of Sadowa, elections were held in Prussia. Patriotic war fever resulted in a big increase in the number of conservatives elected to the Prussian Parliament. The numbers jumped from 34 to 142, while the liberal parties were reduced from 253 to 148. Moreover, after Prussia's victory, many liberals changed their attitude to Bismarck. He was now acclaimed rather than maligned. This ensured an era of harmony between Bismarck and the Prussian Parliament. Only seven votes were cast against an Indemnity Bill introduced by Bismarck at the beginning of the new session. This Bill asked Parliament to grant an 'indemnity' for any actions taken by the government during the previous 4 years without Parliament's consent. Bismarck spoke of the need for the government to work jointly with Parliament to build a new Germany.

Both the left- and right-wing parties in Parliament split into new groupings. A large section of the old Liberal Party formed themselves into the National Liberal Party, pledged to support Bismarck in his nationalist policy, but equally pledged to maintain liberal constitutional principles against any government attempt to undermine them.

On the right, the *Junker* Party opposed Bismarck as a traitor to his class, whittling away at the royal prerogative and losing Prussia's identity in the new unified North Germany. Moderate conservatives formed a new party group, the Free Conservatives. They, together with the National Liberals, were to provide the support that Bismarck needed to carry out his policies.

### The first *Reichstag*

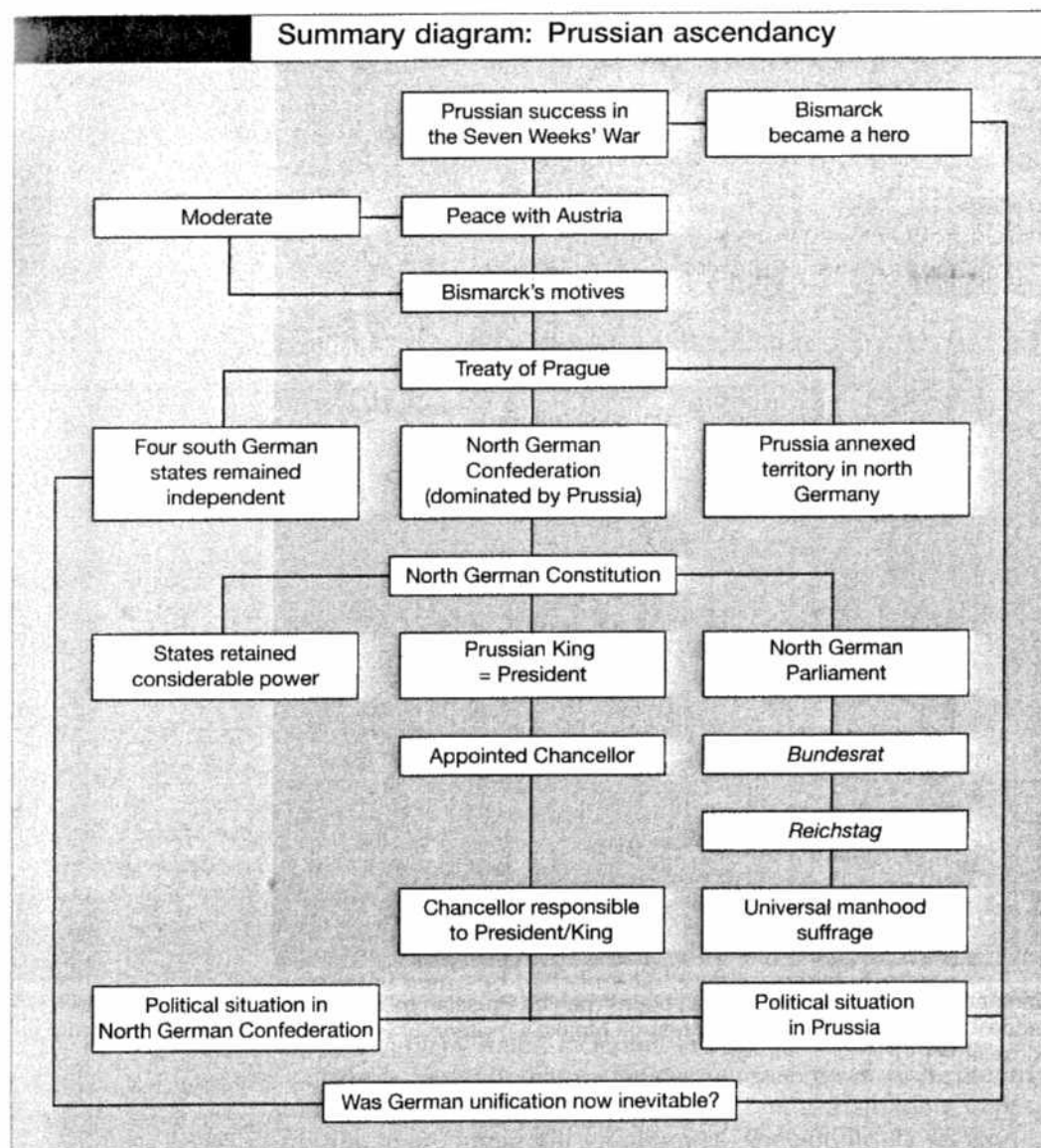
The first *Reichstag* was elected in February 1867. The National Liberals were the largest single party in it and held the balance of power between Bismarck's conservative supporters and his various opponents. They were able to win a number of concessions from Bismarck, now the Federal Chancellor. These included the right to pass an annual budget. This financial control was very limited because it did not include control over the military budget, which accounted for about 90 per cent of the Confederation's spending. The Liberals and Bismarck struggled over the question of the military budget and eventually reached a compromise. It would remain outside the *Reichstag*'s control for 5 years, until 1872. Then the amount of money to be spent on the army would be fixed by law and for this the *Reichstag*'s consent would be required. Generally prepared to support Bismarck's policies, the *Reichstag* carried through an ambitious legislative programme including a range of unifying measures.

### Bismarck and Germany

The Treaty of Prague brought huge gains to Prussia. Austria was now forced to withdraw from German affairs, leaving the field clear for Prussian influence to dominate. Two-thirds of all Germans, excluding German Austrians, were now part of the Prussian-dominated North German Confederation. Most north Germans quickly accepted the situation. For many liberal-nationalists there were no irreconcilable differences between Bismarck's Prussian policy and *Kleindeutsch* nationalism. Unification was happening, even if it was being carried out by force, and some liberals believed that the end justified the means. Indeed, after 1866 Bismarck found himself under nationalist pressure, north and south, to complete the process of unification. Recognising that union with the southern states would strengthen Prussia in relation to both France and Austria, Bismarck was not averse to the idea and was prepared to use the rhetoric and emotion of German nationalism to help to bring it about.

In 1866 the tide in south Germany in favour of union with the north seemed to be flowing strongly. Political parties were established in the southern states to work for unity. In 1867 the four southern states were incorporated into the new *Zollparlament* – a parliament elected to discuss the policy of the *Zollverein*. This was intended to encourage closer co-operation between north and south. However, by 1867 local loyalties in the south re-emerged. Many southern Catholics regarded Prussia with suspicion. The foreign minister of Baden described the North German Confederation as a 'union of a dog with its fleas'. In 1868 the southern states elected a majority of delegates (49 to 35) to the *Zollparlament* opposed to union with the north. National Liberals, who had hoped that the *Zollparlament* would be the motor for national unification, were bitterly disappointed. Bismarck was not too concerned. He believed that in good time, whether by war or simply as a result of evolution, the southern states would fall like ripe fruit into Prussia's basket.

Summary diagram: Prussian ascendancy



**Key question**  
What factors helped  
Bismarck?

## 6 | Factors Helping Bismarck

In 1869 Bismarck wrote:

I am not so arrogant as to assume that the likes of us are able to make history. My task is to keep an eye on the currents of the latter and steer my ship in them as best I can.

He steered brilliantly. However, a variety of factors enabled him to bring about German unification.

### The Prussian army

German unification was the immediate result of three short wars – against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1870–1).





General Helmuth von Moltke – the 'brains' behind Prussian military success. Did Bismarck's success rest on Moltke's military achievements?

The Prussian army thus made Germany a reality. The fighting capacity of the Prussian army improved immensely in the early 1860s thanks to the efforts and ability of War Minister Roon and General Moltke, chief of the General Staff. Roon ensured that Prussian forces were increased, better trained and well armed. Under Moltke, the General Staff became the brains of the Prussian army, laying plans for mobilisation and military operations. In particular, Prussian military chiefs were quick to see the potential of railways for the rapid movement of troops.

### **Prussian economic success**

Prussian economic growth in the 1850s and 1860s outstripped that of Austria and France. By the mid-1860s Prussia produced more coal and steel than France or Austria and had a more extensive railway network. In 1865 it possessed 15,000 steam engines with a total horsepower of 800,000. Austria, by contrast,

had 3400 steam engines with a total horsepower of 100,000. The economic and financial strength of Prussia gave the military resources it needed to challenge first Austria and then France. A key industrialist was Alfred Krupp, whose iron foundries in the Ruhr produced high-quality armaments.

### **Economic unity and the *Zollverein***

The continued spread of the railway and the growth of an increasingly complex financial and commercial network helped to draw all parts of Germany into closer economic unity. So did the Prussian-dominated *Zollverein*, which by 1864 included virtually every German state except Austria. However, while the *Zollverein* ensured that Prussia had considerable economic influence in Germany, this was not translated into political domination. Many German states supported Austria politically to counter-balance economic subordination to Prussia. In 1866 most *Zollverein* states allied with Austria against Prussia.

### **German nationalism**

The failure of the 1848 revolution was a serious blow to German nationalism. However, the idea of a unified state persisted in the hearts and minds of liberal-nationalists. In September 1859 the National Association was formed. Stimulated by the success of Italian nationalism, it promoted the idea that Prussia should lead the German cause (as the state of Piedmont had led the cause of Italian nationalism) and become more liberal in outlook. But gone was the romantic idealism of 1848. Many nationalists now accepted that nothing could be achieved without power. Only Prussia seemed to have that power. At its peak the National Association had only 25,000 members. However, it included many influential men and had close links with a range of other organisations, not least with liberal parties that won growing support in many states, including Prussia, in the early 1860s.

There is no doubt that nationalist sentiment was strong among middle-class Germans who, as a result of industrialisation, were growing in economic and social power. The middle classes tended to lead public opinion. Books and newspapers supported the idea of national unity. Moreover, fears of French expansion were still prevalent. Popular nationalism, strongest in the Protestant north, was a force that could not be ignored by Bismarck.

However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many Germans had little interest in national unity. There was certainly no massive sentiment in favour of a Prussian-dominated Germany.

### **The weakness of Austria**

Austria was a power in decline after 1848–9:

- The Austrian economy was largely agricultural with pockets of industry confined largely to the western regions.
- Austria faced the growing problem of minority nationalism (especially in Italy).

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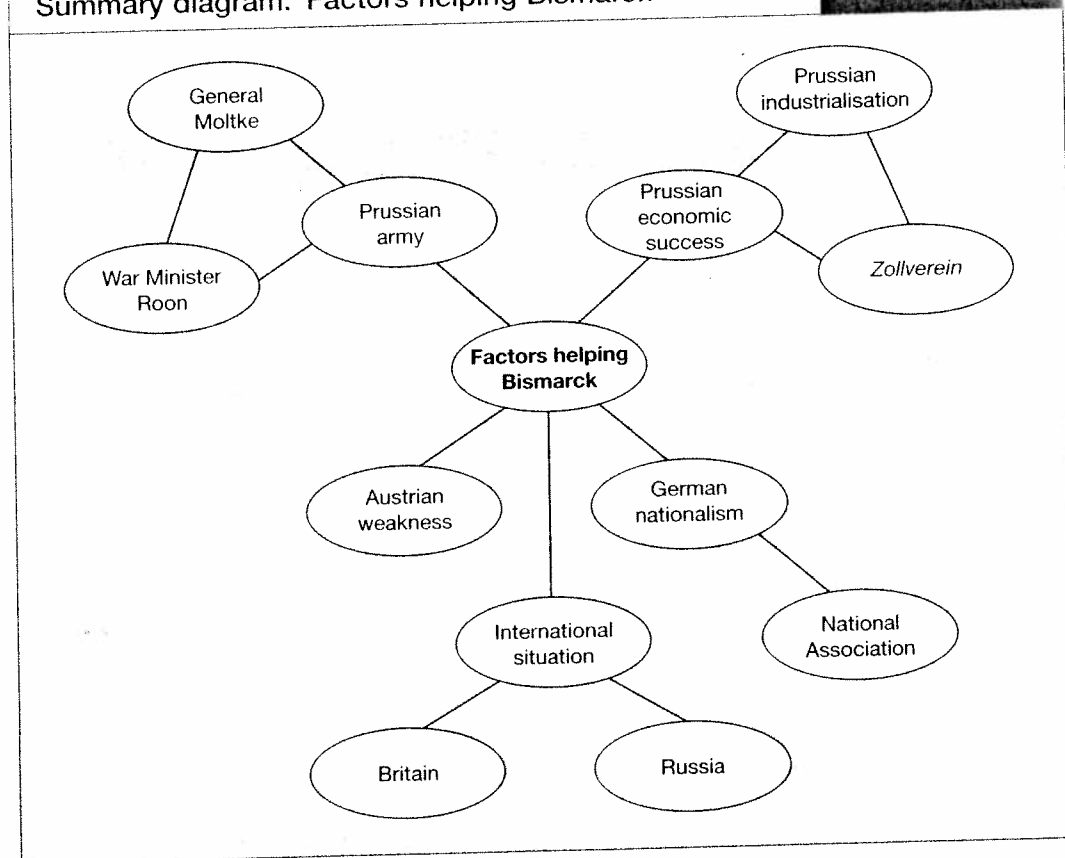
- Austria had mounting financial problems.
- The Crimean War weakened Austria's diplomatic position.
- Defeat in the North Italian War (1859) was a serious blow to Austrian prestige.
- Austrian leaders displayed a lack of political and diplomatic skill.

### The international situation

The fact that Prussia was regarded as a second-rate power in 1862 helped Bismarck. He was able to achieve supremacy in Germany without arousing the hostility of Prussia's neighbours:

- In the 1860s Britain adopted a non-interventionist posture towards continental affairs. The prevailing view was that Britain had nothing to fear from Protestant Prussia and that a strong Germany would be a useful bulwark against France or Russia.
- Russia, concerned with reform at home, showed little interest in central Europe. Its sympathies lay with Prussia. Russia had still not forgiven Austria for its policy during the Crimean War.

Summary diagram: Factors helping Bismarck



## Study Guide: AS Question

### In the style of Edexcel

How far was Bismarck's diplomatic skill responsible for bringing about the defeat of Austria in 1866? (30 marks)

Source: Edexcel, May 2004

#### **Exam tips**

*The cross-references are intended to take you straight to the material that will help you to answer the question.*

Resist the temptation simply to record what Bismarck did. The need for focus and pointing of your material is essential. In dealing with the four bullet points which follow, try to bring out both Bismarck's diplomatic skill and how Austria was weakened in the process:

- the situation in 1862 (page 63)
- the Polish revolt (page 63)
- the Danish War (pages 64–5)
- worsening relations between Prussia and Austria 1865–6 (pages 65–8).

You will also need to stress that Bismarck's diplomatic skill, in itself, was not responsible for Austria's defeat. There were other important factors:

- Austrian weaknesses and mistakes (pages 79–80)
- Prussian military strength (pages 77–8)
- Prussian economic strength (pages 78–9)
- the favourable international situation (page 80).

Reach a conclusion. How significant was Bismarck's role?